DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 434 CS 506 708

AUTHOR Spangler, Lynn C.
TITLE Television Autobiographies: The Audience Speaks for Itself.
PUB DATE Aug 89
NOTE 34p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (72nd, Washington, DC, August 10-13, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Response; Case Studies; *Childrens Television; Higher Education; *Mass Media Effects; Mass Media Role; Mass Media Use; *Personal Narratives; Social Attitudes; *Social Influences; Social Values; Television; Television Research; *Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

Students in a children and television course wrote their "television autobiographies" (that is, their relationship with TV). Forty-three students at a mid-size upstate New York college participated. The autobiographies corroborated the results of previous quantitative and qualitative research, but added a personal, more in-depth look at the individual members of television audiences. Entertainment and information were frequently listed as reasons for watching TV, but escape and companionship were special needs for some individuals when they were children. Many subjects remembered television more because of interaction with their families than actual specific content. Children sometimes used television programs and characters as the basis for play and imagination activities. In terms of behavior, television affected subjects most in how they spent their time. It also affected what they talked about with friends and sometimes caused conflict with family members. Television influenced their play and provided role models to imitate. All but one of the subjects grew up watching educational children's shows on public television, and some programs were mentioned as instructional in social relationships. The most striking influence television seemed to have on the subjects was in the affective domain. Identification with characters often influenced how they felt as children not only while they watched a program, but also after the program ended. For most subjects it was the context of the television experience, not the content, that they most remembered. (Eighteen references are included.) (MG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED310434

TELEVISION AUTOBIOGRAPHIES:

THE AUDIENCE SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

Lynn C. Spangler
State University of New York
College at New Paltz
Depart. of Communication
New Paltz, NY 12561

CS506708

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lynn C. Spangler
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

A tradition has been established in television studies to quantify data (whether that data is on content, uses and gratifications, or effects). Over the last few years, however, several researchers have used qualitative methods for data gathering and analysis. As part of a series of articles in 1983 which considered changes in mass communication research, Robert White wrote that the analysis of communication must begin "with individuals and groups that are attempting to make sense out of a situation and are seeking information."[1] The analysis of communication that White suggests requires at least some qualitative research. Thomas Lindlof, in his preface to a book of qualitative research, said that "qualitative inquiry is directed towards the processes by which individuals incorporate information technologies into their ongoing motives and goals."[2] The emphasis in qualitative research in television is on audience usage and effects. Stemming from Stuart Hall's notion of audiences negotiating meaning from television, researchers have found a correlation between audience usage of television and television effects.[3]

The use of autobiographies as historical data has a long tradition, but they have been used very little as primary data in effects research. Uses and gratifications research often uses essays by subjects, but they are used as a means of generating

categories for statistical analysis.[4] Qualitative research has used a variety of methods in uses and effects research, including participant observation and extensive interviews. Self-reports have tended to be oral (through interviews) or through short essay responses to a series of questions. Such essays are written in situations where there are time restraints and reflection is difficult.

As with any method of research, there are potential problems with using television autobiographies. Asking people to write about their relationship with television assumes, as do interviews and other self-reports, that people are aware of their use of television and how it affects them, and can clearly remember it. In a collection of essays on autobiography, Georges Gusdorf points out, however, that "in autobiography the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of the man."[5] What people have to say about themselves and what they remember is at least as significant as objective facts. Even when researchers collect quantifiable data in strict laboratory settings there is no guarantee of the results. People's perception of how television affects them may be at least as accurate as more objective observations and certainly more interesting and personal. Allowing people to reflect on their relationship with television could certainly offer more insight, if not into effects and uses, at least into how people think about television.

Another problem with autobiographies is that subjects might not write well. Spelling and grammar, however, are not important,

just as grammar and pronunciation are not important in interviews. For subjects who cannot write, portable audio cassette recorders can be used. As in any study, there is always the problem that subjects might attempt to please the researcher or, on the other hand, not take the task seriously. The subject matter of autobiographies, however, could be intrinsically more interesting to subjects than tasks or interview questions which come from researchers. Many people enjoy the opportunity to talk or write about themselves. While some people may find it difficult to write about themselves, talking about their past may be easier than talking about their present--as children we are less accountable for what we do and think.

Besides getting interesting and personal data, there are other advantages to using written television autobiographies as sources for data collection and analysis in uses and effects research. Written autobiographies are not time-consuming to collect. Unlike interviews or observations, the researcher need not be present. This makes data collection less costly, allowing for the collection of large amounts of data, possibly from many different locations. Subjects also can vrite at their leisure, taking time for reflection. The use of autobiography is already well-respected in various disciplines, as James Olney points out:

> autobiography has become the focalizing literature for various "studies" that otherwise have little by way of a defining, organizing center to them. . . .According to the argument of these critics (who are becoming more numerous every day), autobiography--the story of a distinctive culture written in individual characters and from within--offers a privileged access to an experience (the American experience, the black experience, the female

> experience, the African experience) that no other variety of writing can offer.6

The television experience certainly has a vast body of literature available for its study, but autobiographical material from audience members can enrich and expand our understanding of our relationship with this important medium.

Methodology

Researchers can collect television autobiographies in a variety of ways. Inquiries can be made via telephone, but perhaps the best way to solicit autobiographies would be in person through community/business meetings or classrooms. An advantage of group meetings is that it allows for brainstorming to get people thinking about their television experiences. Questions can also be listed for consideration in the written autobiography, but may also be discussed during brainstorming. For example, people tend to enjoy talking about their favorite programs as children. This can lead to questions about with whom they watched television, if any of their play revolved around television programs, did any characters serve as role models, and if they owned any products related to programs.

For the study in this paper, I had students in a Children and Television course write their television autobiographies. The assignment was for three to four typewritten pages, and the class discussed some of their experiences before they wrote the paper so they had a clear idea of the kinds of things they should be thinking about. Forty-three students at a mid-size upstate New York college, almost all from the greater New York City area,

4

participated. Twenty-nine were white females, eight were white males, five were black females and one was a black male.[7] A few were of Puerto Rican descent and several claimed Irish, Italian or Jewish as part of their ethnic background. Two spent their first four years in another country, and one grew up in New York with Spanish as the first language.

The autobiographies were outlined on index cards to get an overview of what their experiences were. Categories then were generated from the index cards and used to organize data in the subjects' own words for analysis and discussion. The categories used for discussion in this paper are: use of television, programs, play based on programs, interaction with others, tv-related purchases, other tv-related behavior, cognition and television, feelings from television, and general comments. As will be seen, the autobiographies used in this study corroborate the results of much previous quantitative and qualitative research, but add a personal, more in-depth, look at the individual members of television audiences.[8] To make quotations easier to understand, spelling, punctuation and some grammar have been corrected.

Television Use

Uses and gratifications research has found many reasons why people watch television and what they get out of it,[9] often initially through essays written by subjects, but personal comments are lost in statistical results. Entertainment and

information are frequently listed as reasons for watching, but escape and companionship are special needs for some children. One subject had alcoholism in her family: "I remember vividly how television was my salvation. I could keep my brothers out of trouble by planting them in front of the tv. . . .I, myself, used the medium totally as a form of escapism."(41) For another young woman television became a substitute friend.

> I must have been around 7 or 8 years old, an age at which most children start developing friendships with their peers, I started to develop a friendship with my television set. I know that sounds kind of odd, but when I was younger I was an extremely shy child. Shy to the point that when relatives used to come over to visit, I would hide under my bed because I didn't want to confront anyone. So instead of giving someone the chance to know me, I found it easier just to escape into the unreality of my favorite tv program and forget all about my life.(39)

For some subjects, television supplied siblings: "I am an only child so the television was sort of a companion for me. Being that I was mostly around adults, the television and the children who portrayed the parts on the shows were a major part of my growing years."(1)

Most subjects talked about spending a lot of time with television, before and after school, during prime-time, and especially Saturday mornings. More importantly, most subjects talked about the importance of watching certain programs because their friends did. They used television as a topic of conversation and as a means of showing they were socially aware or "cool".

> I remember watching Soul Train, but not enjoying it. The only reason that I watched it at all was because everybody else watched it. My friends were constantly

> talking about things that happened on the show--so I just watched it to indulge in conversation with my friends. (3)

Many of the subjects mentioned the Tuesday night line-up on ABC as a "must-watch" because of discussions about the programs the next day in school. Not understanding what peers are talking about and not being able to join conversation can be a terrible experience for children.

> I wanted to watch Happy Days and Laverne & Shirley, but not if my mother had anything to say about it, and she did. I already knew there was no way that I would be able to watch Three's Company. . . .The kids in school would come in on Wednesday morning and talk about the shows, all the kids, but of course I had no idea of what they were talking about because I wasn't allowed to watch those shows. (5)

Soap operas were also frequently discussed, particularly at the junior high and high school level. "It was the big gossip in school. General Hospital was one of the most popular. In between periods you could hear the girls chatting about Luke and Laura."(20) Watching certain programs could also add to a child's status. For example, one subject explained how being able to talk about Saturday Night Live, because it was on late, was an indication in junior high school that one was grown up.(26)

Parents have often been accused of using television as a babysitter. Several subjects pointed out how their parents used television in yet another way.

> My parents realized how much television meant to us, and used it to manipulate us. It became a privilege, a punishment and sometimes an item for barter. "Clean your room and you can stay up late and watch tv" or "If you don't rake the lawn, no tv!" That couldn't happen. It was as if life itself would be drained and devoid of all pleasure. (37)

> Another fond memory was how everyone's parents on the block manipulated us to behave well all week otherwise we couldn't watch the Brady Bunch, Partridge Family double feature on Friday nights.(23)

Interaction

In discussing qualitative research, Lindlof explains that "to stand some conventional terms on their heads, those who do naturalistic inquiry consider 'audience members' to be social actors in many respects, and the 'content' of communication events are the actors' interpretations of those occasions of use."10 Many subjects in this study remember television more because of interaction with their families than actual specific content. Sometimes television was the focus of conflict. An older student vividly remembered when her family first purchased a television set and visitors would come over.

> I remember my house being a popular one for quite a while until my father put up the famous sign. You see, when dirty looks, pointed comments, etc. failed to quiet the talk of the women, my dad made a sign that read "IF YOU WANT TO TALK, GO INTO THE KITCHEN" and placed it on top of the tv. We still talk about that sign to this day. We also talk about the rip-roaring verbal fight that my parents had over that sign. My mother was furious that when friends and family were gathered everyone had to "shut up" and watch the "damned television." (6)

Occasionally there would be conflict between parents and children over television. I have discussed how some parents used television as a means of punishment or reward. Several subjects also mentioned their parents attempting to restrict what they could watch. Such restrictions sometimes caused stress to children when forbidden programs were being watched by peers, as

has been noted under television usage. Often when programs were forbidden children made special efforts to see them.

> I know there were some movies I wanted to see that I wasn't allowed to, because my parents felt the subject matter inappropriate. I remember in sixth grade when there was a Judy Blume movied entitled "Forever," all about the first time a teenage girl falls in love. I was more than willing to risk being punished to see this, after my parents said I wasn't allowed. I slept overf a friend's house in order to watch it. I remember that it changed a lot of my thinking habits after the romantic scenes I saw. (19)

Some subjects remembered parents being annoyed about what they were watching, but usually they were allowed to continue their viewing.

> Three's Company was another show which I watched a lot. My father used to have a fit when he saw us watching it. He didn't approve of two girls living with a guy. I guess that made it all the more fun to watch. (18)

One subject remembered her father being annoyed at the fact that she and her siblings idolized the families on the Partridge Family and the Brady Bunch. (19) Another woman remembered her mother not liking the idea of her thinking of Cosby as her television father. (14) A young man remembered his parents' attitudes changing over time in their household with seven children: "The progression of my parents' actions of our tv viewing went from censorship to explanations when we had questions to giving us all a set and sending us off on our own." (23) While parents understandably got annoyed occasionally at their children's television habits and bickering over programs, one subject remembers an especially angry parent.

> When we were younger my parents never really used to yell at us for watching too much tv. As we grew older

> a new thing called Music Television came about. My father used to go crazy; one time he even ripped the cable out of the back of the tv and made us go right to bed. (24)

Younger siblings often mention how older brothers and sisters dominated their viewing, at least until they got old enough to fight for the program they wished to watch.[11] Some struggled until the bitter end to watch what they wanted.

> My brother Jimmy and I had a virtual monopoly on the tv. Constant fighting was the accepted norm. We had an undemocratic system of determining what would be viewed. The first one in the room controlled the show selection. We would wake up early and run home from school in order to beat each other to the tv room. If someone left the room, they relinguished their rights to the tube. My younger brother became a literal gopher for food, answering the telephone and doorbell. There were many times I had to go to the bathroom and held it until my stomach couldn't stand it anymore. (37)

While television watching sometimes resembled battle zones, the most striking aspect of the autobiographies is the wealth of fond memories subjects had of watching with particular people. As children, they often watched what their parents watched, including shows such as The Lawrence Welk Show, and some programs were shared by the entire family. These shared times were special.

> Apparently those "sick days" are so memorable not only because I was allowed to watch television all day, but because it was a sort of tranquil, caring time spent with my mother. (33)

> . . .I do remember the Bowery Boys with fondness. Maybe because my brother and sister and I watched it together. (28)

> One show that brings back memories for my entire family is the Walt Disney show. Every Sunday my parents would bring us out to dinner but we would always save dessert for when we got home to watch

> Disney. We would all get a bowl of ice cream and sit in front of the television to watch The Wonderful World of Disney. (26)
>
> Shows such as the Brady Bunch, The Six Million Dollar Man, and Gilligan's Island remind me of waiting with my mother, sister and Pop-Pop (grandfather) for my father to come home for dinner. It always makes me smile when I hear the jingle "Here's the story of a lovely lady. . ." for I think of those autumn-winter evenings with my family. (33)
>
> On Saturday nights my dad worked until about 7:30. Championship wrestling would always come on at this time so I think that's why I enjoyed it so much. Sundays were always great days. My grandfather would come over and either we would watch the Mets on tv or occasionally go see them play at Shea Stadium. To this day I am still a die-hard Mets fan, and now that my grandfather is gone it gives me a feeling of him being there to watch a game on Sunday. (24)
>
> As a youngster singing and dancing was fun to see. Many times I fell asleep on grandma's shoulder watching a Bob Hope special or The Sonny and Cher Show. Variety shows were entertaining for both my grandparents and myself. (43)

Many subjects remembered holiday specials and Peanuts cartoons as family events and Saturday cartoons were watched with siblings.

Watching television with friends was a fond memory for many. One subject and her friend took turns sleeping over each other's houses to watch Dallas together. (26) Another subject watched Dallas with her friend on the phone. (9) Daytime soap opera viewing was another common group activity.

> They always kept you in deep suspense on Fridays; therefore, Monday was a big day. About five or six of us would pick up some napoleans at the bakery and go back to my house to watch General Hospital. (20)

At least one other subject enjoyed watching scarey movies with friends.

> My friends and I would go down in the basement for the

> thrillers, turn off the lights, and turn on the screams. I think we scared ourselves more than the actual programs did. (37)

Play and Imitation

Children sometimes use television programs and characters as the basis for play activities.[12] Some remember doing activities along with television programs such as Romper Room. When they got older, many of the female subjects remember privately imitating Jeannie on I Dream of Jeannie and Samantha on Bewitched.

> There were times when I would put the outfit on and walk around the house blinking at everything. (36)

> When Jeannie made herself appear in different places by blinking her eyes and crossing her arms I figured that there had to be some trick to it and I was going to learn it. I tried with all my power to make it work, but I failed to master the skill every time. (42)

> I loved how Samantha could conjure up her magical powers with just a twitch of her nose. I remember placing a cup on the coffee table, wiggling my nose, and waiting for it to move. The final result was picking the cup up and moving it myself. (20)

> I can't count the number of times that I tried my hand at witchcraft. I tried wiggling my nose, my mouth, or anything else to try to make things happen. I soon figured that I was not born a witch and so could not perform these magic feats. I was doomed to live a "mortal's" life. (8)

Charlie's Angels was the basis of play for some girls, allowing them to try out roles they admired.

> As I grew older I began to use television characters as role models. Two friends and I used to play Charlie's Angels constantly. We would sit in the bathroom for hours with a curling iron, trying to make our hair look like Farrah Fawcett's. Afterward we would run around the neighborhood with water pistols solving crimes. (9)

> I was probably around nine years old when myself and my two cousins would climb the local school rooftop, dive over the gutters and fire at each other with our water

12

> pistols in hand pretending we were Charlie's Angels. It was my favorite show at the time; I never missed an episode. This was around the same time when everyone had to have the Farrah Fawcett haircut. (18)

Other favorite programs were also the basis of play activities, often with heavy character identification as the girls developed their own personalities.

> Us neighborhood kids use to get together and play the Partridge Family. My cousin was Laurie, my brother was Keith, I was Tracy and other kids played the other parts. We would actually sing the songs (we knew them because I had a Partridge Family album, of course) and pretend to play instruments. We had such a great time! (2)

> I remember pretending to be certain kids in the famous Brady Bunch family. After all, you can't get a more perfect or secure family life! I remember thinking the girls were so mature and pretty. I went so far as to wish I had blonde hair like theirs. I even remember making believe I was the mother, or sometimes the housekeeper. (19)

> The Land of the Lost occupied a great deal of my outside time. My friends and I developed our own Land of the Lost. Each time we tried to find a new way to get out of the land. And of course there was always Sleestacks chasing us! (22)

> Not only did I watch (Little House on the Prairie) with my friends, we also made a play out of it. We use to pretend that we lived on the prairie. We all role played a particular character. I always chose to be Mary, and my best friend chose to be either Mrs. Oleson or Nellie. We all had so much fun acting out the parts. It kept us busy all afternoon. (42)

> My sister and I would pretend we were Penny and Judy, the two daughters on (Lost in Space). We would argue over who Judy would be. My sister always won. (36)

> My sister Jennifer and I would put our hair in curlers and dress in robes and sing Dawn's (Tony Orlando and Dawn) part. Whenever I watched Donny and Marie, I acted it out with my friend Alexandra. We took turns on who would be Donny. (32)

The few men in the sample tended to remember more aggressive play activities based on television programs, including cartoons and monster movies. One said "my brother and I would pretend that we were these monsters and have epic battles to see who was the toughest." (12) Another mentioned playing army while Vietnam was in the news. One mentioned play activity that was theme oriented after a show the neighborhood kids watched, such as Emergency: "We supplied the dialogue but much of the action was based on the show, its characters and even the plot of the previous night's episode." (23) The Little Rascals was a favorite of one male.

> Many times I'd enjoy seeing them so much, I would go out and do some of the things they did. I remember after seeing a particular scene where they built a racing car out of junk scrap wood, then going outside and doing the same thing. (7)

While the women remembered imitating Charlie's Angels, Jeannie, Samantha, The Partridge Family and the Brady Bunch, the men remembered imitating Fonzie from Happy Days and Barbarino from Welcome Back, Kotter. One subject loved the latter show because all the characters were class clowns like his brother, whom he admired, but Fonzie was still the best.

> Nobody was cooler than the Fonz, not even my brother; both my brother and I knew that. Fonz was the first bad guy who was always out for poetic justice. He would make any situation of turmoil turn into a success. I liked the Fonz so much he was the character on my lunch box. (24)

Several subjects remember boys walking around in school with slicked-down hair, teeshirts and black leather jackets giving a

thumbs up sign and saying "aayyyyyyyy" as Fonzie did. Fonzie had competition, however.

> As Vinnie Barbarino, Travolta gave an alternative to Fonzie, but most boys idolized both. Much to teachers' dismay, kids began to emulate the behavior of the "sweathogs" on Kotter in class. In fourth grade, we had nicknames for each other, based on the show. To my delight, I won the distinction of being Barbarino, no small thing in a class with so many boys! (10)

Only one subject remembers a bad experience from play based on a television program.

> One incident I recall in which imitating tv led to a dangerous situation occurred when I was nine. We were playing Hogan's Heroes and I was playing the character Carter who was the scientist and bomb maker. Playing in someone's garage attic using candles for light and goods in the garage as props, we were acting out the scenes. When my scene came up I was to make a bomb somehow. I was using a can of spray paint near one of the candles and it ignited in my face, losing my sight for a few minutes. (23)

Other Behavior

In terms of behavior, television affected subjects most in how they spent their time. Even though television was sometimes a secondary activity, most subjects spent a lot of time watching it. As also discussed above, it affected what they talked about with friends and sometimes caused conflict with family members. It also influenced their play occasionally and provided role models to imitate. Besides imitating the singing and dancing from the many programs they watched, some subjects consciously tried to model their behavior on particular characters. One young woman remembered expecting her parents to treat her like the parents on

The Brady Bunch treated their children. When she went running from the dinner table and slammed the door to her room, she expected her parents to come running after her to find out what was wrong; they didn't come and talk to her "like Carol and Mike would have." (38) She also remembered consciously picking out an outfit like Marcia would wear when she went with her father to pick up her new baby brother at the hospital. It has already been noted how several girls imitated the Farrah Fawcett look. One girl even kept a diary and intended on sending it to Fawcett at the end of the year. When they were younger, many also recalled dressing up on Halloween as their favorite cartoon characters, such as Casper the Ghost. While boys tended to emulate the look of the Fonz and Barbarino, the school behavior of some was also evidently affected.

> I thought of the kids on Happy Days and Welcome Back, Kotter as being the coolest people. As a result, I was a bit of a smart aleck around this time. I was talking back in school a lot and thinking it was the acceptable thing to do. The wise guy expressions on Welcome Back, Kotter were used often. (19)

Another young woman remembered being influenced about a college decision.

> I remember one episode of Eight is Enough where Tommy was at the age where he had to start thinking about college. His father was trying to push him to go, but Tommy wanted to stay home to pursue his musical career. I was about Tommy's age also, and at that time I was debating whether or not to commute or to go away to school, and I think that that episode persuaded me to make the decision to stay home. (39)

One subject got the idea to run away from home after watching a television program.

> When I was very young, I saw a program on television about some children who ran away from home. When it was over, I started looking through my clothes and wondering what to take when I run away from home, like the children on television. Of course Mother said not to worry about it since the only place I was going was to my room. (16)

Many were inspired positively by television programs. One young woman remembered doing a report on the Salem witch trials in elementary school after she was introduced to witchcraft on Bewitched. (38) After being introduced to monster movies on television, one young man became known as the "monster fan" in school, drawing pictures from the movies, "telling plot details, and staying up until 2:00 a.m. to watch Bela Lugosi or Lon Chaney, Jr." (10) American Bandstand and Soul Train were a major part of the lives of a young black man and his friends who formed a band and even took music lessons. (7) Another young man remembered Bugs Bunny cartoons as an inspiration for his interest in music. He particularly enjoyed recording the openings: "I remember having a tape full of them, and noting the subtle differences in instrumentation while conjuring up the visual images in my mind--that of the Warner Brothers Logo zooming up to my delighted eyes." (10)

Several owned products based on television programs, including albums from Sesame Street and The Partridge Family, dolls, and posters. Some obviously got products they asked for after seeing it on television and some didn't, as

---

quantitative research has also found.13

> I can remember seeing a cereal commercial on tv then running to my mother and actually begging her to buy

it. The same went for toys. Once I saw it on tv I had to have it. I would get my mother and show her the toy and say "See, Mom, this is what I want--can you pleeeeeease get it for me?" My mother's response was "we'll see." Needless to say, I always got the toy." (36)

I can remember wanting a doll advertised on television and begging my mother to buy it for me. My mother explained that it was too expensive, but I still begged everytime I saw it. I never got the doll. (16)

Cognition

All but one of the subjects in this study grew up watching educational children's shows on PBS. Sesame Street and The Electric Company were favorites, and many recalled learning to count, recite the alphabet, and speak a few words in Spanish. Some enjoyed the slower pace of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and some did not. Some commercial network programs were also instructive. For example, Schoolhouse Rock segments on Saturday mornings "were informative songs and cartoons about grammar, math, and spelling. I believe they helped me in school because all I'd have to do is remember the song and I would remember the grammar rule." (27)

Some programs were mentioned as instructional in social relationships. The Big Blue Marble was cited by at least one subject who found a pen pal through the program and learned about the world.(27) The same person mentioned Roots as helping her to understand what it felt like to be a black person during the slave trade. Another black program taught many lessons to white children.

When we were young we lived in a racially mixed area

> so there wasn't much difference between black and white. Fat Albert was an all black cartoon, but we never looked at it like that. In each episode Bill Cosby, who narrated the show, had a moral statement. For instance, "do unto others as you would like done unto you." (24)

The Magic Garden was mentioned by at least two young women as having important lessons.

> The Magic Garden gave me a chance to fantasize about living in a garden. I used to wish that the two women were my friend Alexandra and I. The educational value of this show was that it taught me how to get along with others. As I think about it, it's remarkable how that show helped strengthen a friendship I had with Alexandra. (32)

> One time they explained how important it was to learn your phone number in case you became lost. I made sure that my mother taught this to me for I felt that what the Magic Garden said was important. (25)

An older woman who experienced television when it was new to everyone recalled seeing the presidential election in 1952, and how programs such as See It Now and Victory at Sea helped her to understand what her father and her friends' fathers went through during World War Two and the Korean War.(6) One of her friends looked at the footage carefully in hopes of catching a glimpse of her father who was killed during the last days of World War Two.

Many subjects compared their own lives as children to television programs.[14] A black male whose first language was Spanish had an especially difficult time relating to television.

> I saw television as a false and phony type of entertainment I could never identify with. When I saw some of the programs, I did not understand why many of the people in television were so wealthy and lived in glamorous worlds, which I never saw in my environment. . . .I found that programs of this type (Leave It To Beaver) were too simple and did not seem real. There were many disagreements among family members in my neighborhood, and the parent usually got tired of it and resolved the situation with a belt. This

is something I never saw on television. (7)

While many of the white subjects, particularly the females, mentioned how they wished their families were like the Brady family, most recognized the impossibility of having a perfect family. One young woman wrote that

> I was somewhat of a cynic when I used to watch The Brady Bunch and evaluate each episode. Take, for example, the episode when all of the kids were sick in bed with the measles. Each child was given a bell to ring whenever they needed something, so good old Carol and Mike ran up and down the stairs every two minutes. My mother and father would probably take that bell and whack me across the side of the head with it. I guess that show was so amusing because they were too perfect to be the average American family. (18)

One young man remembered calling his brother to watch a Brady Bunch episode with him because it concerned getting a driver's license at a time when his brother was going through the same thing. Nevertheless, he was still skeptical of some of what he saw in the program and recalled an episode concerning football: "I can remember that it was odd that Greg came home after the game right away. I remember when my brothers would win a big game they would be out partying with the rest of the team and then would come home." (17)

In the early years of their cognitive development, subjects remembered television programs only vaguely.15 Sometimes remembered images were frightening. One young man remembered watching soap operas with his mother and clearly recalls a man falling off a tower in a death struggle. (10) Others' early memories included:

My first recollection of using tv must have been in

> my pre-operational stage. It was a Saturday morning cartoon at six a.m. about a little boy spaceman who flew around with a jet pack but didn't speak (I don't think) and I was scared of him. I would come down earlier than six before programming started and watch the fuzzy screen, imagining the scrambled screen was race cars zooming by. (23)
>
> A few of the programs I watched when I was under five years old still remain fuzzy. I can't remember names, but I can remember some things that happened--puppets in space ships battling toy tanks and other exciting things of that nature. (12)

One young woman's earliest memory was of the Beatles' cartoon, but she recalls only their accents. Similar to how others used programs in reference to certain events, such as fathers returning home from work, she used the theme song at the end of The Addam's Family to tell her mom when it was time for her bottle. (9)

Several subjects admitted confusion about content in programs when they were young, sometimes believing what they saw was real. One young woman claimed to listen to the teacher on Romper Room more intently because she had the same name as her sister, but she was somewhat disappointed: "I believed she could see me and I would wait for her to call my name. She never did and so I felt that she was ignoring me." (27) Others expressed similar beliefs in program reality, sometimes leading to disappointment.

> As a child watching Little House, I remember thinking that this show was not really a show at all. I really believed that it was happening somewhere and that people really lived like that this day in age. Pa Ingalls was just the best dad ever. It never occurred to me that the Ingalls and Olesons were actors! (28)
>
> I can also recall thinking there were actually super heroes

> that flew around and rescued people, such as my friend Superman. The truth is that I looked for Superman when my grandmother use to take me to New York City. I thought for sure he would fly over the Empire State Building, or amongst the Twin Towers. I wasn't as gullible when it came to the Flying Nun. (19)
>
> I never understood soap operas then, but now that I do I watch the same ones my mom used to watch. I used to think that the crazy things that happened were true and were really happening right on tv. (24)
>
> I think the worst let-down about Sesame Street was when my mom took my friends and me to the coliseum in Cohoes, New York to see Sesame Street live. Before we went, I was so excited about seeing Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, Bob, Marie, and the others. All of us talked about it so much. When the day came and the curtain opened I was shocked to see that all the characters except Bob and Marie were fake. I thought they were real on tv, but when it came to see the costumes I realized for the first time that things on television were not always real. Sesame Street was never the same again after that. (29)

Parents were often consulted about what was seen on television. One male subject was upset when his brother told him that, contrary to what he saw on Captain Kangaroo, grandfather clocks could not talk and teddy bears could not dance: "But my mother told me not to listen to him, and in fact I didn't." (29) Another subject wanted to live back in the 1950s after watching Happy Days, and consulted her mother about what it was like. (18)

Confusion abounded about many topics. A young woman as a child was concerned about the children on the Peanuts' specials not having parental supervision, particular when they made a Thanksgiving dinner on their own. Another was confused by Land of the Lost: "I always wondered which came first, the dinosaurs or ~~Jesus Christ." (33) After watching the yearly showing of The~~ Wizard of Oz, one girl would cry: "I never understood why the

Tinman, Scarecrow and the Lion couldn't go with her. I couldn't understand that they were just part of her imagination." (36)

Some expressed an early skepticism of television program plots.

> Shows like Mr. Ed and Gilligan's Island did not suit me very well. That being because I knew fully well that it wasn't the horse talking and that if the ship's crew could have all that stuff on the island, they could build themselves a boat. It did occur to me that I wasn't suppose to watch them that way. (30)

> I thought it can't be that difficult; you can do anything on tv. Later, I figured out that it was part of the plot. Without being lost, or stranded, there would be no show. It began to make sense, but it still irritated me. (40)

Many subjects remembered enjoying prime-time programs with family members, even though they did not understand a lot of the content. Their enjoyment came from other things. One young man watched Star Trek with his brothers.

> I know at the time I really didn't understand Spock's logic or humor involved, but I loved space and astronomy-related subjects. For years I dreamed of being an astronaut for NASA. Star Trek was an escape from reality. Think about it, Star Trek was the future being seen in the present. (43)

The same young man recalled watching television with his father to help him learn what he thought to be important information.

> Every Sunday my father and I watched Wide World of Sports at 4:30 on ABC. This program showed me what skiing, baseball, football and basketball were all about. I recall watching the Olympics every year, learning the various sporting events. To a young boy it is important to know what sports are about, who's good, the popular players, and who is the champion. Television sports showed me all of this plus more. (43)

A young woman found Mr. Rogers' activities an adventure as a young girl because of her relatively deprived environment.

> For some reason I remember getting very excited when he would go to the sandbox in the back yard. First of

all, I don't think he would go there very often, so it was exciting when he did. Secondly, the fact that he had two doors in his house (a front one and a back one) thrilled me because I lived on the 7th floor of an apartment building and I thought it was something special to go outside your home and the outside belonged to you, too. (34)

A few subjects mentioned how they understand and enjoy particular programs more now than they did when they were children. Bugs Bunny cartoons were often cited as examples.

> Although I hardly ever paid attention to the plot, a learning experience did develop from watching these shows. For example, on Bugs Bunny the rabbit was always walking around with a carrot saying, "What's up, Doc?" I began to relate rabbits with carrots. Through Tom and Jerry I learned cat chases mouse, and coyotes chase roadrunners through the Roadrunner. However, as I grew older I realized that there was a story to go along with all the animation. (20)

> My father enjoyed watching Bugs and he found it more humorous than me at the time. But over the years I've picked up on the subtle jokes and play on words that I could not decipher when I was five. (40)

> I catch more humor and small details now. I also enjoy the fact that classical music is played to the action--I never realized that as a child! (41)

Emotions

Many subjects claimed to have learned various things from watching television, and several discussed ways in which programs, particularly characters, affected their behavior. The most striking influence television seemed to have on subjects, however, was in the affective domain. It has already been discussed under the interaction section how people fondly remembered watching programs with particular people. Television often influenced how they felt as children in other ways,

however, not only while they were watching a program, but also after. Some subjects mentioned how certain programs frightened them.16

> Chiller Theatre was something that used to scare me. My grandfather always watched these old horror stories. I don't recall the movies so much as the introduction. A six-fingered hand would break throgh a dirt patch in the ground while eerie music played. Sometimes I plugged my ears and hid my eyes when it was on. (27)
>
> One night on Chiller Thriller they aired "The Lady with the Green Fingers." The woman in the movie was working in her garden when this hand came out of the ground and grabbed her. For the longest time I would not go near any flowers growing out of the ground, for fear the hand would come up and grab me. (36)
>
> (The Night Stalker) gave me terrible nightmares; what a show. I remember once I was left alone in my summer house for a whole week, mostly by myself. One night the show came on. Let me tell you, I got scared real fast and real bad. You can't imagine how long it takes to fall asleep listening to the wind whistle around and under a house which sits on a silent beach. (35)
>
> I will never forget the first scary movie I ever saw. It was called "Scream Peggy Scream!" I had nightmares about it for a month. I just wasn't old enough to realize it was just a movie. (28)
>
> I remember being in my third grade class and a close classmate of mine told me that watching the show Bewitched was sacreligious. She explained to me that the characters on the show that played witches were really the devil in disguise and anyone who watched it would go to hell. Can you imagine how frightening that was to me? When she told me that, I didn't watch the show again until sometime during high school (when I finally came to terms with my fears of going to hell). (3)

While some television programs scared subjects, others helped them feel smart.

> In each episode (of Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids) there was a lesson to be learned. But I remember thinking "how dumb can they be; they're so wrong," speaking to the cartoon characters. At the end of the

show it was always the way I had "told" them it should be. It was the same way with Davy and Goliath on Sunday mornings. I knew what was right and wrong. (5)

I liked [The Electric Company] because it was a change from cartoons. As I grew out of cartoons very quickly, The Electric Company made me feel as though I wasn't watching those childish, boring cartoons anymore. Now, I was on to bigger and better shows! (8)

I enjoyed [children's shows on PBS] because they didn't state that they were educational shows and if you can't understand what's going on you're a moron. That's how it felt when my father was teaching me. Their idea was to give me negative feedback each time I got the time wrong. For example, by calling me stupid and telling me everyone knows how to tell time. That really hurt, now everytime I was asked the time by my father I would be scared to answer, afraid I might fail. The educational shows made it easy and fun to learn. (20)

Several subjects mentioned how they enjoyed seeing children their age on television. Particularly minorities and women discussed how important it was to them to see people with whom they could identify in programs.17

I think this type of show (Zoom) motivates young girls. The stars were my age, so this brought hope to what could be accomplished. As I stated, earlier, identification is a must. This show presented that. In this show young Black girls were portrayed in a positive light. (14)

Zoom was a program that I could relate to. The people on the show seem to be about my age, and I liked about that program was that the kids that I could relate to some were black. I used to enjoy the Jackson Five for that same reason. Besides being talented, they were black and when I was growing up, just to see another one of my kind on a tv show was enough to make you watch it. . . . Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids was another good show because the characters were Black and they were also the average black kids, just like the ones I grew up with in my neighborhood. . . .The one thing I do remember disliking was the fact that they made all the characters have big lips. (31)

[On Courtship of Eddie's Father] they developed a very understanding relationship where the son would ask questions about something he did not know about. The

> father would always sit down and explain everything to him. At times, of course, there were disagreements, and the son would over-react by crying, being angry or even running away from home. But eventually they would talk their problems out. I really liked this program because it reminded me of my own life, where I was raised by one parent. (7)

For several white females, The Brady Bunch girls were the ones with whom they identified. When Jan Brady got glasses, one subject said she thought it was okay for her to wear them, too. (1) Another related to Jan because they both were the middle child in birth order. (2) Many subjects mentioned envying the Brady Bunch family and wishing they were part of it.

Although they were not always easy to find for minorities and girls, role models were sought by the subjects as children.

> When I saw (the American Music Awards) I could really see myself one day being on television for the best "disco" singer of the year. And because of these dreams, the only programs that mattered to me were singing artists' shows. (7)

> As a child I preferred to identify with such characters as the Bionic Woman, Wonderwoman, and Isis because these were strong women who could run with the boys and beat them! These women were also extremely beautiful and intelligent. . . .Madonna came out when I was 16 and strengthened my self-image by giving my philosophy agreement. I was wearing all that wild clothing, my hair was cut short in a nouveau fashion and I was doing what I wanted--just as Madonna was. (15)

> Laverne and Shirley always got me excited about getting my own apartment when I was done with school. My best friend and I had it all planned out and practically couldn't wait to move in. (26)

Characters on television were not only possible role models; to many subjects they were friends.[18] One young woman remembers crying when her brother made fun of Felix the Cat, "as if my

brother was making fun of a good friend of mine." (26) Another remembers feeling sad and confused when one of the regular members of Sesame Street would leave. (27) One young woman as a child was concerned about Julie on The Love Boat, initially thinking that Julie had a glamorous job, but later thinking that she had a lonely life. (8) Laura on Little House on the Prairie was the cause of concern to at least one subject: "I would cry when bad things happened to her. I hated Nellie just as much as Laura did." (28) One admitted to wanting Cher as a sister if she could not actually be her, and, of course, many girls wanted to be Farrah Fawcett. As girls, many also idolized boys on television programs, such as John Travolta, Henry Winkler, and Donny Osmond, purchasing fan magazines and posters by the dozens. I mentioned earlier how soap opera characters were a popular discussion topic of girls who got very involved with the characters. One young man became particularly attached to the characters on M*A*S*H.

> After a while you felt like these people were your own family and you knew them better than they knew themselves. . . .When the final episode came on I taped it and watched it three times to really get the whole meaning across to myself. I couldn't believe what happened to my favorite character, Hawkeye Pierce. I was very unsettled about the whole thing for weeks. The other part that troubled me was Charles' line in the mess tent at the end. He said that he always felt refuge in listening to his music but not anymore--it will be a constant reminder of this awful place. What an impact that show had on me. The episode when Col. Blake dies and Radar comes in and informs everyone in the operating room set me back a few steps and brought me closer to the characters. (17)

Conclusion

The information from television autobiographies corroborates much of the past research in television uses and effects while it makes the data more personal and insightful. Autobiographies can also reveal the intensity of certain uses and effects. For example, for most subjects it was the context of the television experience, and not the content, that they most remembered. Many of them had very vivid, affectionate memories of watching television with certain family members. All but one of the subjects grew up with Sesame Street and other educational programs, crediting them with teaching them various skills. Their behavior was most often affected by the very fact they spent so much time with television viewing. Many also role played based on television characters; however, more than anything, television seemed to have most of its influence in the affective domain. Identification with characters could make them happy or sad. Some programs scared them, even after the program was over. Sometimes programs made them feel smart or validated what they liked or who they were. And remembering what they watched as children could also make them feel good. One young man wrote:

> My earliest remembrances of cartoons were Speed Racer and Gigantor. Recently I saw Speed Racer on a cable channel and I felt like I was shot back in time. It was the best feeling. (40)

Furthermore, the subjects in this study enjoyed writing their television autobiographies, an indication that this type of research can yield a wealth of interesting, useful data.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert A. White, "Mass Communication and Culture: Transition to a New Paradigm," in Journal of Communication 33 (Summer 1983): 295.

2. Thomas R. Lindlof, ed. Natural Audiences: Qualitative Research Of Media Uses and Effects. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1987. Preface, p. x.

3. David L. Swanson, "Gratifications Seeking, Media Exposure, and Audience Interpretations: Some Directions for Research" in Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 31 (Summer 1987): 238. For a discussion of Stuart Hall and audience negotiation of meaning, see John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television" in Channels of Discourse, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Fiske discusses Stuart Hall's essay, "Decoding and Encoding," as a turning point in British Cultural Studies "for it opened up the idea that television programs do not have a single meaning, but are relatively open texts, capable of being read in different ways by different people." (p. 260) Thus, audience members are active readers of the television text, negotiating meanings according to their own personal circumstances and cultural backgrounds.

4. Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick, Mass Media Research: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987), p. 382-385.

5. Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 43.

6. James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction," in Autobiography: Essay Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

7. Quotations from the autobiographies in this study are followed by a number which is a reference to the subject quoted:

Black females: 3, 13, 14, 16, 31
Black male: 7
White males: 10, 12, 17, 23, 24, 29, 40, 43
White females: all others

---

8. For a good overview of quantitative effects research, see National Institute of Mental Health, "Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties," in Media Now, ed. Donald F. Ungurait, Thomas W. Bohn, and Ray E. Hiebert (NY: Longman, 1985), pp. 456-476. A good example of a semiotic approach to television effects research is Robert Hodge and David Tripp, Children and Television (Stanford.

Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1986). For another qualitative approach see David Morley, Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986).

9. For several recent uses and gratifications studies see the symposium on this subject in the Summer 1987 issue of Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media.

10. Thomas R. Lindlof, ed., Natural Audiences: Qualitative Research for Media Uses and Effects (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1987), p. x. I became interested in television autobiography as a research method after hearing Navita Cummings James, "Black Women in the Mass Media through the 'Eye' of Feminist Theory" at the Speech Communication Association convention in Boston, 1987.

11. Research shows most coviewing is done with "peers"--family members around the same age group. See Daniel G. McDonald, "Generational Aspects of Television Coviewing," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 30 (Winter 1986): 75-85.

12. Early experiments in the effects of television violence showed children imitate aggressive acts in their play. The "Bobo doll" studies by Albert Bandura and others are part of social cognitive theory. See, for example: Bandura, A.; Ross, D.; and Ross, S.A.; "Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology 66 (1963): 3-11 and Albert Bandura, Social Foundations of Thought and Action (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986). Not all imitation, of course, is of aggressive acts.

13. During the 1970s when Action for Children's Television waged its first campaign against advertising to children there were several research articles about parent/child interaction over commercials published in Journal of Communication. See, for example: Wackman, Daniel B.; Wartella, Ellen; and Ward, Scott; "Learning to be Consumers: The Role of the Family," Journal of Communication 27 (Winter 1977): 136-151 and Sheikh, Anees A. and Moleski, L. Martin, "Conflict in the Family Over Commercials," Journal of Communication 27 (Winter 1977): 152-157. Now there is concern over program-length commercials, such as The Smurfs, and more Congressional hearings over children's advertising.

14. For a recent discussion of perceived reality research see W. James Potter, "Perceived Reality in Television Effects Research," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 32 (Winter 1988): 23-41.

15. Works concerning cognition and television include Jennings Bryant and David R. Anderson, eds., Children's Understanding of Television: Research on Attention and Comprehension (NY: Academic Press, 1983) and Alan Wurtzel, "From Piaget to Prime Time," Television & Children 6 (1983).

16. Research on television and fright response includes Joanne Cantor, Glenn G. Sparks, and Cynthia Hoffner, "Calming Children's Television Fears: Mr. Rogers vs The Incredible Hulk," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 32 (Summer 1988): 271-288 and Glenn G. Sparks and Joanne Cantor, "Developmental Differences in Fright Responses to a Television Program Depicting a Character Transformation," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 30 (Summer 1986): 309-323.

17. A good annotated bibliography of content analyses in this area is available: Nancy Signorielli, ed., Role Portrayal and Stereotyping on Television (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

18. Recent research on parasocial relationships between audience members and television characters draws on the field of interpersonal communication. See, for example: Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh, "Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 31 (Summer 1987): 279-292.